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Belorussian Communism and Nationalism -- Personal Recollections

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Introduction: 1917-1920

668 The February Revolution of 1917 must be considered the turning point in the history of the Belorussian national movement. From the first days of the revolution there took place throughout all of Belorussia, especially in the future capital, Minsk, various congresses, conferences, and meetings in which, besides discussion of special questions, the problem of the future destiny of the area and its state structure occupied a position of by no means minor importance. All along the enormous front, in Petrograd, the Baltic Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, in Odessa, and in other places, Belorussian officers and soldiers organized their own national committees and unions in, as it were, an answering echo to the activities in the homeland. Belorussians on the front were very interested in the political doings at home. Subsequently most of those who had organized committees at the front occupied prominent positions in national work at home.

Post-revolutionary events and the national questions raised by the masses required solutions and the acceptance of some kind of decisions. Searching for a solution, the political leaders of the time came to the conclusion that only a congress of delegates elected by the whole nation would be authorized properly to determine the form of the state structure of Belorussia, and likewise to resolve the most pressing post-revolutionary questions.

668 642 The First All-Belorussian Congress convened in Minsk from the eighteenth to the thirty-first of December, 1917. Of the delegates present 1,167 had a deciding voice and 705 a consultative voice. However the Congress did not finish its work and on December 30th was dispersed by armed units of Bolsheviks. The Congress passed on its powers for the conduct of further work to the Rada of the Belorussian National Republic, then and there elected at the Congress. The Rada chiefly utilized the underground to carry on its work under the difficult conditions of war and the Bolshevik terror. In its session of March 25, 1918, the Rada passed a resolution of historic importance for the Belorussian nation, known as the Manifesto of March 25. In the Manifesto it was stated that "Belorussia declares itself to be an independent National Republic."

648 refuge on Soviet territory, and meanwhile Soviet propaganda interpreted the "exploits" of Mukha and other units as the anger of the Belorussians nation against capitalist Poland. From the B. S. S. R. special propagandistic literature was sent into western Belorussia, as were Communists prepared for underground work who carried on propaganda there as well as organizing Communist and Komsomol cells. Nor did the Poles remain in their debt. They also organized units and forays into the territory of Soviet Belorussia where they ravaged the revisional committees and the village soviets, in some cases not disdaining to conduct pogroms of the Jews. The raids which were made upon the towns of Kopyl' and Koydanov in the Minskaya oblast' are well known . . .

668 The destructive war and the Bolshevik terror greatly weakened the national forces of Belorussia. A significant part of the active political workers who had taken part in the all-Belorussian Congress and in the further work of creating an independent National Republic were forced to emigrate across the border. /3/ Only a few individuals remained in Belorussia and their number was somewhat augmented by those who returned from the front. At the time, the national-democratic intellegentsia estimated the political situation correctly. The Kremlin and Poland were pursuing their own political ends, which were completely foreign to the interests of the Belorussian nation. Warsaw had set itself the goal of turning Belorussians into Poles in the shortest possible period. And Moscow had destined Belorussia to be a convenient ground for the preparation of its own specific measures towards the quickest possible Communist revolution in the West and as a first step in neighboring Poland. Belorussian national forces could not reconcile themselves to such a destiny for their country. Immediately after the Soviet-Polish War there were attempts to preserve their independence by armed force. The famous Slutskiy uprising broke out in the end of 1920; more than ten thousand fighters for freedom and liberty took part in it. The Slutskiy uprising was quelled by the overwhelming strength of the Red Army. Belorussia was then covered with a thick net of partisan units, some of which resisted until as late as 1930. A correct appraisal of the situation led the Belorussian national leaders to the decision to elect the path of lengthy, painstaking, and patient work within the B. S. S. R., involving the elevation of the national consciousness of the masses and the preparation of young cadres for active work. When the Bolsheviks were forced to give up

●668 'War Communism' which brought with it hunger and disorganization, and enter upon the New Economic Policy, many were filled with hopes of a regeneration of the Soviet power...

Editors Note: the sub-titles of this article are in English in the original Russian text. They have been copied here, except for any reference to the Ezhovshchina which is spelt Yezhovshchina in the original and which we spell Ezhovshchina.

Educational Campaign in Belorussia

Professor Vsevolod Ignatovskii played a leading role in the Belorussian national movement. He was the People's Commissar of Public Education of the BSSR (1). A group of archive nationalists

1. At first V. Ignatovskii was for a short while the People's Commissar of Agriculture of the B. S. S. R. of his biography in the Literaturnaya Entsiklopediya /Literary Encyclopedia/ by the Communist Academy, 1930, p. 417.

united around Professor Ignatovskii with whom a whole series of cultured and prominent public figures sympathized and who aided in the national work, although for various reasons they did not want to become openly involved. In the first place, it was necessary to bring out the nationally thinking intelligentsia which had been dispersed throughout the farthest corners of the province, having been driven from the cities in search of food during the time of famine in the cities. It was necessary to open and organize upper and middle s schools /4/ and prepare the youth for work in all fields of the national economy and culture. The narrow circle of leaders of the movement arrived at what seems at first sight to have been a strange conclusion: not to obstruct conscious young members of the intellegentsia from entering the Communist Party, even to suggest the idea and in some cases compel them to become Party members. It was considered that Belorussians, especially the intellegentsia, in the Party, would the more quickly reach leading positions in the Party and the administrative apparatus, and it was supposed that the national aims would be realized sooner and more successfully through the Party.

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214 The People's Commissariat of Public Education of Belorussia /Narkompros/ became the headquarters of activity. Here follows a short schematic description of the most important measures taken up until 1930. The Narkompros took measures to have the instruction in all schools translated into the native language. This was difficult work since the schools did not have textbooks in the native language, the lack of elementary readers in the primary schools being a particularly difficult obstacle to overcome. However in a comparatively short period old and experienced teachers compiled some elementary readers modeled upon the literary styles of Belorussian writers, and a famous Belorussian linguist compiled a school grammar of the native language (1).

1. Ia. Lesik compiled a school textbook of the Belorussian language; the first normative grammar of Belorussian on a scientific basis, adapted simultaneously for use in schools had been issued in 1918 by the Belorussian philologist, V. Tarashkevich, long before Lesik.

The majority of the presses in Belorussia had been destroyed during the war and in any case, they were not suitable for mass publication of textbooks. During the course of a year some textbooks were printed in Germany and a few in Wilno under the direction of the well known writer D. Zhilunovich who was a member of the collegium of Narkampros. He subsequently reorganized the publishing business and the presses in Minsk. With contemporary techniques, the work which he accomplished would not seem to be very great, but in those times, against a background of general devastation, it was quite an accomplishment.

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666 Normal schools were opened in Minsk and a number of other cities. The one in Minsk played a particularly positive role. It was staffed with the best teachers, and during the twenties was named after Professor Ignatovskii. The education in these normal schools was directed toward the preparation of teachers who were also politically active nationalists. Their graduates subsequently devoted themselves, with great success, to the cultural rebirth of their nation. /5/ Many of them finished universities, and out of the former pupils of the Minsk normal school there developed a number of talented poets and writers. To fill the great lack of teachers of

668 the Belorussian language one-year courses were made available in
871 the secondary schools. These courses remained available, as a provisional measure, for all, up to regular graduates of the pedagogical department of the Belorussian University. Taken all together these measures made it possible as early as the beginning of the academic year of 1924, to change the curriculum to the native language in schools, kindergartens, adult evening schools, and stations for the liquidation of illiteracy.

563 Parallel with the Belorussianization of the schools Narkompros[1]
871 took practical steps to guarantee their own languages to the schools of the national minorities. The work among the Jewish population was particularly successful. The special Jewish inspectors of Narkompros, and in the neighboring towns as well, worked intensively to open schools, kindergartens, orphan homes and libraries for the Jewish population. This great task was not always accomplished smoothly, and thus aroused some dissatisfaction against the zealous promulgators of the national policy. Under the new system parents did not have a free choice of schools for their children; besides, in the cities and especially among the Jewish intelligentsia, only Russian was spoken in the family, and the children experienced great difficulty in learning Hebrew when they got to the Jewish national schools. Then, in addition, after completing a Jewish secondary school they had a very limited choice of higher schools for further education. A thorough knowledge of Russian was necessary to pass the entrance examinations into an institution of higher learning outside Belorussia, and in the Belorussian university itself there was only one Jewish subdivision (section) in the educational department where the lectures were given in Hebrew. Therefore some parents went to work in the R. S. F. S. R. or sent their children to school there, and thus the Jewish secondary schools, especially the upper classes, were not full, having three to five pupils in a class. Nevertheless the work accomplished was great and fully responded to the national feelings of the masses among whom Zionistic tendencies still existed. Among the special normal schools in Belorussia were the pedagogical academy in Gomel' which had instruction in Hebrew, and the agricultural technical school in Kurasovshchina, not far from Minsk. Jewish children were fully assured of having seven-year schooling and even secondary schooling in some cities. Homeless orphans were collected in Jewish orphan asylums, and there were a sufficient number of kindergartens. /6/

[1][the People's Commissariat of Public Education of Belorussia--Analyst]

423 the land was hereditary property, which had the positive results of continual and steady use of the land and the negative one of constant subdivision of the peasant holdings in the country. The Bolshevik uprising did not bring about any significant improvements in the life of the small holders as sovkhozes and kolkhozes were organized on the large estates. Up until 1930, D. Prishchepov, a former Socialist-Revolutionary, was the head of the National Commissariat of Agriculture. He had managed to live abroad and become acquainted with agricultural conditions in Denmark and Germany. Upon his return to Belorussia he contemplated a series of measures which he considered the more useful since they were in accordance with the desires of the great mass of the Belorussian peasantry. So as to increase the land fund and distribute it among those who had little or none, Prishchepov managed to abolish a part, although an insignificant one, of the Soviet farms and also to bring about significant reductions in the land belonging to these establishments. As the basic unit of land to be used, Prishchepov chose the small village of ten to twenty peasant farms, with comfortable farmsteads of up to one hectare in size. /11/
[311] Even in those times it cost him* a great effort to prove the advantage of the small village over the large one as a method of land exploitation. The necessity of rapid reconstruction of the system of land tenure in Belorussia was obvious. In the first place there was the question of what to do with the reserve land which had been given for temporary use to the landless peasants and those with small holdings. Then, it was proposed to apportion crowded and disorganized large villages among small ones. Part of the peasantry wanted small separate farms under the new system, but Prishchepov could not officially establish separate farmsteads. In practice it happened as an exception that, when lands were being distributed in the woods, separate farms were
668 cut out as well as small villages. . . To placate the theoreticians, Prishchepov* had to assure them that it was very easy to make the transformation from a small village to an agricultural commune. Prishchepov knew quite well how absurd these assurances were, but being one of the leaders of the national movement he was guided by the interests of the country and not by the presuppositions of the
654 Communists which at the time were both unclear and confused. In addition to increasing agricultural assistance Prishchepov* introduced a series of measures designed to encourage improvements on the holdings of independent peasants. Various types of agricultural exibition

* [D. Prishchepov, head of the National Commissariat of Agriculture, beginning about 1920 to 1930 - Analyst]

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Only toward the end of 1926, after the most persistent petitioning in the Kremlin, and at that time petitioning had not yet become perilous, the question of uniting the Gomel' Guberniya to the B. S. S. R. was raised. However M. Kalinin himself, the President of the Central Executive Committee of the R. S. F. S. R., came out sharply against unification. The Kremlin was forced to resort to a peculiar sort of plebiscite in order to refute the pretensions of the Belorussians. It organized a special commission with the Latvian, Peters, as president, which was to determine on the spot what language was spoken by the inhabitants of Gomel' Guberniya. It was decided that the population had forgotten its language and finally become Russified. No research was undertaken to determine where the population belonged ethnologically. The commission traveled around the sizable territory of the Gomel' Gubernıya using the following method for its investigations: upon arriving in some inhabited place and meeting the peasantry, the members would enter upon some sort of unofficial conversation. This was taken down in shorthand, and an analysis of the notes refuted the calculations of those who had opposed the inclusion of Gomel' Guberniya in the B. S. S. R. The real reasons for the opposition to having the Guberniya transferred were of an economic nature. Gomel' Guberniya is very rich in various raw materials, especially high quality forests which are so situated that transportation of the wood is very convenient. It is criss-crossed in many directions by railroad lines and convenient water routes. A well equipped match industry is centered there, one which at that time was the most active in the U. S. S. R., and there is a paper industry in Dobrush. Obviously it was not intended that the economy of the B. S. S. R. be strengthened at the expense of that of the R. S. F. S. R. This is confirmed by the fact that such industrial centers as Zlynka, Novozybkov, Klintsy, and Starodub, all within twenty or thirty kilometers of Gomel', were not given to the B. S. S. R., simply because some match factories and other manufacturing are located there. The fact of the unification itself passed unnoticed by the masses. Gomel' Guberniya was included in the B. S. S. R. without the customary fanfare and pomp. /13/ The Belorussian nationalist circles were faced with new problems. It was indispensible to take all measures to include the new territory with its Belorussian population within the general scope of operations as quickly as possible, and, moreover, this transitional process had to be accomplished very carefully and painlessly. It all

668 depended on the capable efforts of the new Belorussian workers who
631 were sent into what had been Gomel' Guberniya. They were able to
728 cope with the task.

Minority Problems

563 The equality on the Belorussian territory of the four official
191 languages, Belorussian, Russian, Polish, and Jewish, was recognized by a govermental decree. In practice only Belorussian was at all widely used, and Russian was employed in dealing with institutions of the U. S. S. R. Jewish and Polish were spoken in the national schools, kindergartens, theaters, libraries, and so on. The severity with which equality of the four languages was enforced sometimes became absurd. In the town of Rechitsa in 1928, at a municipal teachers conference, one participant who was the principal of a Jewish school made her observations in a speech in Jewish. Of course
661 an interpreter had to be used. A Belorussian schoolteacher, Mokhnach, who had been renowned in the past for his liberal convictions and activities, but who unfortunately was versed in the unexpected twists and turns of Soviet policy, proposed quite correctly that all speakers use "Russian, as it is the most widely understood." For this proposal, which would appear to have been quite innocent, Mokhnach was accused of Great Russian chauvinism, immediately fired from his job, excluded from the trade union, and also deprived of a pension after his forty-five years of service in the school system. This shows just how unsuccessfully the Soviets could choose a subject upon whom to demonstrate how severely and unrelentingly anyone would be punished who transgressed against the Stalinist policy towards the minorities.

563 Special court chambers where litigation was conducted in
[692] Jewish were opened in the large cities to serve the Jewish population. In small towns and in some larger ones where Jews lived in compact groups, local and village soviets were formed -- providing service for the population in its native language. /14/

The national work concerning the so-called Polish population of Belorussia was a rather special case. In Minsk and in other cities there were several responsible workers /in the nationalist movement/ who were Poles by nationality. They were almost all Communists and native-born Poles, for the most part deriving from the Polish Socialist Party (P. P. S.). Moreover, twenty-five percent of the native

called a 'vydvizhenets' /promoted worker/. Generally such workers were appointed as deputies of various kinds; independent work was not given to them /16/ because of their non-Party status and the fear of distortions in the Party line . . . To tell the truth they often had to sail with the wind, orient themselves according to Party workers, and compromise with their convictions, especially in settling peasant problems. The leaders of the Belorussian national movement made use of this well-advertised and all-embracing campaign[1] to send out their best propagandists for further work in planting the Soviet state apparatus "in the soil" and especially to select vydvizhenets workers /for their own ends/. It would be possible to mention many successful vydvizhenets, as examples. For instance in the Slutskiy Okrug, the peasant vydvizhenets Fedorovich enjoyed unquestionable authority, occupying the post of deputy president of the okrug executive committee. The peasant vydvizhenets Dubovtsev made such a favorable impression with his work that as a result he even became Deputy President of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet. He possessed the necessary qualifications in administrative work, was modest both in his personal life and on the job, and a promoter of the national work. Part of the vydvizhenets group returned to their former jobs in the kolkhozes and factories, and a very insignificant portion entered the Party.

The official organs which had the job of guiding the national work were the so-called National Commissions in the center and the district centers. The staff of a National Committee was composed of representatives of the separate nationalities. However they had no practical or organizational significance. The work was carried on outside their auspices and without their guidance. It was almost a dead superstructure of which there were and are many in the Soviet system.

Belorussians in Poland

Everything done by the nationalists in the B. S. S. R. had a colossal influence upon the Belorussians, especially upon the youth and intelligentsia, living in western Belorussia, which was under Polish rule. There they had no right even having been deprived of the right to acquire property. Without renouncing its nationality the intelligentsia could not find work. The Belorussian primary and high schools were closed, although they were

[1] [To raise the morale of the peasants caught in an unfavorable economic situation. Cf. p. 19, cat. 116--Analyst]

(64) Afterwards he put a lot of work into organizing the Institute of Belorussian Culture and later was President of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences. In Odessa on January 13, 1919, Nekrashevich was careless enough to greet the French general, Bartel, in the name of the Belorussians. This became known in Minsk and when the National-Democrats were being dispersed, S. Ia. Vol'fson in his work against them, Ideologiia i Metodologiia Natsdemovshchiny, /The Ideology and Methodology of the National-Democrats/ wrote, "S. Nekrashevich welcomed General Bartel in Odessa, 'On behalf of the National Center of Belorussia, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies in the South of Russia, who bring us not only the hope but, I would say, the guarantee of a speedy liberation from the oppressions of the Bolsheviks who for more than fifteen months have been devastating our country' ... Nekrashevich begged General Bartel for armed assistance." (pages 69-70)

Belorussia became Soviet; Belorussians and Odessites, returned to Minsk, and the majority of them held responsible positions. The welcome Nekrashevich had extended to General Bartel was not forgotten, however, but was unearthed from the archives and figured on every occasion as a shining example of the political untrustworthiness not only of himself but of the whole group of "Odessites." The calculations of the Belorussians were not justified. His appointment to Gomel' did not save him from the G.P.U. He was arrested before he even started work there, condemned, and sentenced to work out his term of punishment on Medvezh'ja Gora near the construction of the White Sea Canal. Evidently Balitskii died there since we have no more information about him. His wife's death was also tragic. Being a doctor of medicine she was not arrested but later went insane.

Zhilunovich and the "Nats-Dems" /24/

214 668 The Belorussian State Publishing House played a prominent role in the national work. It was the only institution of this kind in Belorussia and issued all printed matter with the exception, of course, of newspapers and periodicals. This publishing house also regulated the priority of everything else published. It was headed by the outstanding Belorussian writer and politician of the older generation, Dimitrii 668 Zhilunovich (who used the pseudonym Tsishka Gartnyi).

668 Zhilunovich (who used the pseudonym Tsishka Gartnyi). Evidently it
● was a lot harder to square accounts with him, since he was the organizer of the B. S. S. R. and the first president of its government; Stalin knew him personally as he was Commissar of Nationalities when Soviet Belorussia was being organized. However, Zhilunovich was removed from the directorship of the press even though he was left in the Party.
668 The fate of the creator[1] of the B. S. S. R. is tragic and instructive.
661 Coming from a workingman's family in the revolutionary town of Kopyl', Minsk Guberniya, his life was difficult and eventful. Unlike other remote towns, Zhilunovich's birthplace distinguished itself by the organized revolutionary activity of its population. This is witnessed by the fact that in 1905 the government had to detail a whole company to this locality to preserve order. In those days it was possible to meet representatives of all the revolutionary parties here -- Socialist-Revolutionaries, Social-Democrats, Narodniks, and a rather large number of Bundists. Zhilunovich spent his childhood and early years in this revolutionary environment, working as a tanner; later he went to big cities like Riga and St. Petersburg. In 1917 he was immersed in revolutionary activity up to his ears, he even laid aside his writing. During the NEP, while the Soviet power was becoming stabilized in Belorussia, simultaneously, significant successes were being attained in the national work. Zhilunovich, and other nationalists with him, drew some erroneous conclusions and committed a series of political mistakes. A convinced democrat and nationalist, he put a high value on the culture and way of life of the West. He admired the order and organization of German life, where he had spent more than a year while directing the printing of textbooks for Belorussian schools. He sincerely believed that the B. S. S. R. was going to be a national, democratic republic. Many of the Belorussian politicians of the time shared this mistaken view and Moscow made use of it. Zhilunovich was entrusted with the mission of "persuading" Belorussian emigrants, and especially former members of the government of the Belorussian National Republic, to give up their mandates from the /25/ Belorussian Congress and return to Minsk where they would be given responsible posts. Not yet experienced in the Kremlin's methods a number of eminent Belorussian politicians listened to these persuasions and returned to their homeland. They were all subsequently liquidated by the G. P. U.

In 1926, Zhilunovich was one of the initiators and organizers of the Academic Conference for reforming the Belorussian orthography

1 [Dimitri Zhilunovich - Analyst]

and alphabet. Many Belorussian emigrants came from abroad to be present at it. The brigade of the Marxist-Leninist department of the philological section of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences, in exposures of National-Democracy, writes about the Conference as follows, "The Academic Conference for reforming the Belorussian orthography and alphabet was in fact an open demonstration by National-Democratic counter-revolutionary forces - those in the B. S. S. R. as well as those who were abroad at the time and came to the Conference from their emigration -- Lastovskii, Ezovitov, Zhilka, Golovinskii, and others" (pages 110-111). In the hall where the Academic Conference was held there were no portraits of the leader, no Soviet flag, and naturally no propagandistic slogans of any kind. All this was possible, of course, in 1926, when they were trying to show the Belorussian emigrants that cultural activity in the B. S. S. R. has no connections with political affairs. Zhilunovich paid dearly for all this, from 1930 until his very death. Everything was brought up against him, and in 1933 he was expelled from the Party during the purge. At the end of 1936 or the beginning of 1937, he was arrested. He went out of his mind from the tortures and torment of cross-examination and was sent to Mogilev to the prisoners' division of a hospital for the mentally ill. There he either died or was poisoned. In the same year, one of his admirers, peculiarly enough a chief of the regional militia, secretly tried to find out where this martyr was buried. But the G. P. U. is good at hiding its tracks and the search met with no success whatsover.

Mass Arrests in Minsk --1930-1931

Mass arrests took place in Minsk in the middle of 1930. The provinces escaped almost unscathed, but prominent Belorussian cultural figures were arrested from the Academy of Sciences, the University, the Narkompros, and some in the Narkomzem /People's Commissariat of Agriculture/. Among those arrested was People's Commissar of Agriculture Prishchepov's deputy, Aleksandr (Ales') Adamovich -- and "Odessite" like Balitskii and Nekrashevich. While still a youth he had participated ardently in the work of the Bobrujsk Uyezd, Minsk Guberniya. /26/ After several years his ardor cooled, and in about 1925 he became a zealous nationalist. To his confederates, Adamovich whole-heartedly and sincerely confessed and repented that during the first years of his Soviet work,